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ABSTRACT

Television commercials and print ads have proven to be an effective means of introducing composition students to strategies for analysis and writing. They rely heavily on the eye to interpret images quickly according to fairly reliable habits. They are naturally occurring forms of argument and students have substantial intuitive competence with them. One instructor employs ads to teach argumentation in the following manner. On day one, each student brings a copy of a print-medium (newspaper, magazine, flier, etc.) ad that is interesting, wild, appealing, or convincing. Before students begin working on their own ads, however, the instructor shows them one from his collection and the class together analyzes its argumentative structure. Students determine what the ad wanted readers to do and to think; then, they consider what, on the most basic level, the ad assumes is true. On day two, students set up a context for expanding their logic maps. After reviewing the previous day's work, students volunteer objections to the ad's persuasion. They question the premise of the ad and recognize counter-arguments; conditions of rebuttal, and the necessity to provide hard evidence. On day three, the class views five or six television ads and then divides into small groups for analysis. Finally, the class moves on to student-generated arguments that are natural, such as letters to the editor, response columns or editorials. Students use the same logic maps when analyzing each other's writing that they used when analyzing the ads. Advertising analysis also allows for discussion of values. (A 12-item source list is attached.) (TB)

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Advertising Literacy: Persuasive Writing and Values[1]

> No discussion of persuasion, which is of course universal, can get very far unless we ask what the persuasion is for. The slipping away from questions of social motive, and the slipping back to isolated questions of method, show a limitation of consciousness, a moral nervousness. (50-1)
>
> Raymond Williams
> On Television (1989)

> At her peril, considering the conventions and codes used in the ad, [Geraldine] Ferraro has inserted her name into the economy of cultural codes. Ferraro, in the Pepsi commercial, attempts to speak a reordering of the symbolic code of binary oppositions which constitutes women. . . . (352-3)
>
> Mary Ellen Brown
> "The Dialectic of the Feminine: Melodrama Commodity in the Ferraro Pepsi Commercial."
> Communication Vol. 9 (1987): 335-354.

> While combining elements of information and art, advertising, strictly speaking, is neither. (27)
>
> Andrew Wernick
> Promotional Culture (1991)

I was struck by Jacqueline Jones Royster's Opening General Session address and her emphasis on speaking and listening--and the

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[1] This paper continues the line of development begun as part of a graduate seminar in composition with David Mair, Director of First-Year Composition at the University of Oklahoma. In addition to my students, I also should thank my colleague, Jim Bond, whose collaboration made an early stage of this project so productive and rewarding. This presentation substantially revises and updates work first published in the Oklahoma English Journal. 7.1 (1992): 52-55.

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skills which constitute hearing--I believe she called it how we "demonstrate" that we're listening to one another. To shift the grounds of this important idea to the composition classroom, I am trying to constitute a site of conversation in which listening is not taken for granted. I believe writers bring an intuitive skill to the classroom which, if I will listen more closely to discern that skill, will prove that Kenneth Levine is right when he argues that literacy is a "collection of interrelated cognitive and linguistic capacities" (183).

Advertising as *Logos*

Television commercials have proven to be an effective means of introducing composition students to strategies for analysis and writing since I fist began using them several years ago. I probably should not have been surprised when my composition students responded to argumentation with collective groans, sighs, and rolling eyes. Out of desperation for arguments that would engage their attention, I followed a colleague's lead and decided to try using advertising as a medium for teaching argument.

Since those early beginnings with these classroom practices, I have not only discovered their strengths, but I also have learned that logos-centered writing instruction must incorporate a corrective to ostensibly values-free presentation of advertising--the old argument that advertising reflects values but does not shape them. This element is not new. In 1969, Raymond Williams was discussing television commercials when he wrote: "no discussion of persuasion

. . . can get very far unless we ask what the persuasion is for" (On Television, 51). Classroom presentations of visual materials must not neglect these questions of motive. Exploring what Williams calls the "social motive"--what is at stake in creating an argument--is complex for students living in a diverse world. How can students be encouraged to explore what they have at stake in their persuasive writing? What classroom practices help students form bridges between their own values and their aims in persuasion?

Modeling Logic-Mapping

Print ads and television commercials are effective models of persuasion because they are not based primarily in written language. They rely heavily on the eye to quickly interpret images according to fairly reliable habits. They are naturally occurring forms of argument and students are have substantial intuitive competence with them. For instance, they are well-accustomed to looking for the "purchase-required" proviso--this conditioning starts with the first "prize inside" offer on a box of cereal.

But more important than their familiarity with the genre, we usually need help learning to look for buried values. Using advertising as argument leads students to discover assumptions in materials which permeate their lives. This is the core of my instructional objectives, which are designed to begin where students are and move toward discussing how assumptions lie beneath all arguments. These assumptions are a key point in teaching

logic. Richard Larson writes that in teaching effective invention students must search for their own assumptions, implied judgements, and the submerged use of emotion (97). This digging down to foundations is an approach also used by rhetoric texts such as Ramage and Bean's Writing Arguments or Leonard J. Rosen's Discovery and Commitment.[3] More specifically, I use print and video ads to help build up to analysis of complex arguments such as Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" or to the documentation essay at the end of the semester.

Generally speaking, I introduce *logos* using the following plans:

Day One:

Each student brings a copy of a print-medium (newspaper, magazine, brochure, flier, etc.) ad that they have found to be interesting, wild, appealing, or convincing. I begin with an introduction of the argument unit and its ultimate writing goal (usually a persuasive letter).

Before they begin working on their own ads, I show them a sample from my collection. A favorite of mine is for a brand of bottled water. I read the ad text and showed the illustration to the class. Then I begin using probing and redirecting questions to lead the class into whole-group analysis of the argument. As

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[3] I have not yet been able to study a second edition of Nancy Mason Bradbury and Arthur Quinn's Audiences and Intentions: A Book of Arguments (Allyn and Bacon, Boston: 1994), which includes a new section on advertising and analysis of this mode of persuasion.

they begin to share ideas, I make notes on the board using the phrases they provide.

For example, I ask what the advertising executives wanted readers to do. This is essentially asking for a claim. I write the class' answer on the board: "You should buy our bottled water." "What is the reason they give?" I ask. They reply: "because it is pure." I try to remember how a clearly-constructed because-statement will help reveal the universal truth and specific instance. This is the first important phrase I will construct on the board or overhead transparency, but I am careful not to identify any of the phrases with rhetorical names until later.

Once we have a claim and a reason on the board, I ask students: "In the broadest sense, what does this statement assume is true?" or "What must be true for the reason to work?" With only a little probing, they will identify the broadest assumption behind the ad: natural water is pure water. Next I ask for how the advertising pros linked their product to this general truth. They respond that the brand of water is natural, mountain water straight from a glacier. As a result, I say, a particular conclusion becomes fairly clear: The brand of bottled water is pure.

Once the class has made it this far, the rest is a fairly simple process of linking up rhetorical terms with each of the phrases we have identified. Rather than use stuffy, arcane language, I use the terms "universal truth," "specific instance of

that truth," and "inescapable conclusion" or "result."[3] These tag phrases seem more accessible than the Aristotelian syllogism or Toulmin scheme.

Once the class is able to construct this modified syllogism on the board, I divide them into groups of 3-5 and give them time to model this analysis on the ad of their choice from among those brought by their group. First they list the enthymemes, choose one, and develop a logic-map on that enthymeme.[4] As I walk among the groups to provide spot help, I try to emphasize that students can choose the most interesting, controversial, problematic, or provocative because-statement buried in the ad. It will be only one of several because-statements found there. After 10-15 minutes, the groups will be finished and usually are enthusiastic about sharing their ads with their peers. I try not to worry about whether the ad is for a lingerie shop or auto parts, new cars or a food product. The results are always interesting and fun.

Day Two:

By having the students focus on arguments in advertising, I find that we can set up a context for expanding our logic-maps in ways that seem relevant and fresh. After reviewing the previous

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[3] You may choose to work toward the Ramage and Bean's scheme of Toulmin logic: claim, reason, grounds, warrant, backing, qualifier, and conditions of rebuttal. I have found that introducing students to a modified syllogism and then expanding the model to a "relaxed" Toulmin model works better.

[4] If you find the appeals helpful, you can also ask them to identify what the ad appeals to: intimidation and deception, facts and reason, emotion, or the audience's values and beliefs.

day's work, students often volunteer objections to the ad's persuasion. For example, they will wonder about the possible contamination of the water source by pollution or campers. If the class members are unusually docile, they may not object to the claim and reason. They may see it as hermetic. In this case, I sometimes try to prompt them to question the premise of the ad. But one their objections begin to flow, I try not to stifle these comments, but encourage them by writing them on the board and trying to account for them with rhetorical concepts. For example, this sets the stage for introduction of concepts such as recognizing counter-arguments, qualifying a claim, admitting conditions of rebuttal, and providing hard evidence.[9]

Day Three:

I do not bring in the video advertising until the class has practiced the modified syllogism and I feel good about their grasp of the claim, universal truth, specific instance, and inescapable result. Sometimes I grade a short, student-generated argument as a way of surveying their knowledge and giving them additional practice. This may require several days. Then I bring in television or video ads. By this time, the class may be bored with the idea of mastering Toulmin's expanded scheme. Using material

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[9] Students may also observe that some of the arguments mix appeals or argue dual reasons to support the same claim (You should buy this brand of power drill and when you do we will contribute to a patriotic cause). I try to encourage this probing as long as it focuses on <u>how</u> the argument is going about its business.

they already know, like, and are proficient with, injects fun into the process and provides an important change of pace.

I tape television commercials to create a sequence of 5 or 6 commercials. I again divide the class into groups and assign each group a commercial by the name of the product or service being advertised. I instruct them to analyze the commercial using the logic maps we've created in the past. Their objective is to develop at least one argument (because-clause, universal truth, specific instance, and conclusion) for the assigned commercial. I remind them to choose one enthymeme and develop a map for it, since each new enthymeme would require a new logic map. I then play the video two or three times and give the groups several minutes to work. Some groups may discover multiple arguments or may require spot help to divide and clarify each argument package.

After each group is finished, I start in order of the video and ask the first group to send a volunteer to the board to record their findings and report to the class. Then I replay the commercial and ask students what they see. By probing and redirecting, we usually discover, and then I try to emphasize, the concepts in the expanded, Toulmin logic model such as qualifiers, conditions of rebuttal, audience-awareness, need for hard backing, or appeals to emotion. We may have materials which are yet to be fully identified as a rhetorical strategy or device.

The commercials raise issues which are not easily resolved. Students are able to see how a model's body is idealized, but may need encouragement to articulate the rhetorical impact on the

commercial. Some classes may need prompting to identify how sound, image, editing, voice-over, or other elements of the medium impact their impressions. My students seem to be so intuitively competent in reading film that they "get" the commercial's point, but don't have the critical literacy to understand how the rhetor achieved this effect.

On the other hand, some classes may identify elements of persuasion which are yet to be fully identified as a rhetorical strategy or device. To me, the exciting part about this day is that usually student participation is different than in previous classes. Students who never volunteer to be a group's recorder, who never go to the board, or who never offer comments, are drawn into the class conversation about a beer commercial featuring three frogs who ostensibly learn to say a brand name.

Moving to Student-Writing

Once I have helped students learn to analyze argumentation in a context that is contemporary and relevant, I then move toward student-generated arguments which are also naturally-occurring such as a letter-to-the-editor, claim letter, or response columns to editorial pages. We often start with brain-storming sessions designed to mimic the logic maps we created earlier. I ask students to use the same format for putting their first topics and ideas on paper. Creative use of television commercials has proven to be useful for introducing students to <u>logos</u> because they present arguments in a format with which students feel competent and

comfortable. They discover their own intuitive competence with argumentation, and that confidence can transform the process of writing arguments.

But What About Values?

After I learned to introduce logic-maps and a subsistence vocabulary of rhetorical terms to my students, I could no longer avoid the questions I had about why students continued to struggle to grasp the core of rhetorical analysis: finding that which is hidden and making it visible, open to scrutiny. It is this more challenging part of my goals which I believe is the "deadly seriousness of intellectual work" (Hall 286).

My students seem to be able to grasp the most obvious forms of advertising gimmickry--the way in which models function in a jeans ad which never visualizes the jeans themselves, or how a celebrity's endorsement may be purely a cash transaction--but they struggle to see that visual images have become what Donna Haraway calls "artifactualism"--that "nature for us is *made*, as both fiction and fact" (297). Haraway's point about de-natured, cyborgian experience is precisely my concern--that everything has become a matter of rhetoric within my classroom if not elsewhere. All processes have become a matter of strategy and positioning. Is this what I am trying to teach my students? How likely are they to engage this kind of radical de-centering of their own values and experiences? Can I ask students to endure the cyborgian subject position which this radical critique entails?

As you will see, I was unsure how to elicit this kind of student work. But I think I knew it when I saw it as the result of a happy accident when Sarah Henderson, an art major enrolled in my Composition II course, asked if she could try completing the "critique of an ad" assignment in visual form.[4] I will admit that somewhere deep in my "teacher psyche" a little alarm was ringing. Would all rigueur escape the project once I agreed to let it slip out of language as it is usually constituted in composition classrooms? I agreed to her request and the result a few days later put all my fears to rest. She had produced an insightful critique of values in advertising. But how could I encourage her to incorporate an articulation of her methods, strategies, and ideas without sacrificing the honesty and immediacy of her visual de-constructions? After all, even if for the sake of fairness to others in the class, I was not yet sure that Sarah's intuitive skill was rooted to our work in the class. So I asked her to write a gallery brochure, as it were. Could she prepare the background information which gallery visitors would need when her work was on display? Who was her inspiration for the project? What were her goals? What were her methods?

Sarah's "Artist's Statement" was a satisfying response to my experimental assignment. She discussed the work of Barbara Kruger, whose placement of short phrases across advertising images is well known. But Sarah did not stop at acknowledging her predecessor.

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[4] Sarah has graciously given permission for the use of her portfolio as an example for discussion.

She also incorporated her experiences putting her original document together--with ads "scattered" around her on the floor. She wrote:

> As I kept honing in on the main assumptions, one key question kept surfacing--'Who decides?' Who decides that two months salary is the right amount to spend on a wedding ring? Who decides that hungry looking models are beautiful models? Who decides that wealth makes you pretty? And as I continued, my project, for myself, became an empowering statement that I decide.

Sarah's sense of empowerment stunned me, I suppose, as much as it overjoyed me to see her clear articulation of the transformative power of her awareness of "hidden agendas" in visual persuasion (Henderson). Other students have responded to the use of ads in the course by sensing the importance of visual persuasion, but focusing on how our activities clarified abstract issues of rhetoric--another type of making the obscure more visible. During the end-term evaluations, two students wrote the following comments:

> Use of ads was very helpful, both print and video, because it helped me to <u>visualize</u> the concepts and apply the theory to a real, familiar situation.

> The use of print ads and TV commercials helped me to understand the concept of grounds, warrant, backing, etc. A <u>picture</u> explains a lot more than just reading a chapter in a book. (Emphasis Mine)

Regardless of advertising's value for clarifying rhetorical terms with pictures, as these two comments indicate, or my stumbling onto an occasional, bright student whose visual literacy is enormous,

I am left to puzzle out the various impacts these activities may be having on students' critical literacies--their abilities to pose important questions and to engage in what Mary Ellen Brown calls the "reordering of the symbolic code(s)" which constitute their world (352-3). It is this ability, what Raymond Williams calls the asking "what persuasion is for," that continues to pose the most serious challenges.

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